

Okky Madasari's poem "Kepala Babi" as a representation of the transformation of the symbol of violence: A literary appreciation perspective

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Abstract

In sociopolitical dynamics, a gap often exists between the theory and practice of enforcing power; while theoretically, rulers project absolute dominance, in practice, they frequently rely on symbolic intimidation to silence public critical reasoning. This study aims to describe the structural integrity of the physical and inner aspects of the poem "Kepala Babi" (The Pig's Head) and to dismantle the semiotic mechanisms behind reversing the meaning of terror objects into instruments of subversive resistance. The method employed in this study is qualitative-descriptive, utilizing content analysis dissected through the lenses of structural poetry theory and cultural semiotics. The main findings indicate that the poem "Kepala Babi" possesses solid structural integrity, wherein vulgar-macabre physical elements organically integrate to convey the poem's defiant and cynical inner layers. Furthermore, the study uncovers a radical mechanism of deconstruction and re-coding of violence symbols, where material objects of intimidation, such as the pig's head and rat carcasses, are successfully reclaimed by the public and transmuted into back-aggression energy through culinary metaphors (rica pedas perlawanan) and metaphysical psychological warfare (teluh). In conclusion, this study asserts that the poem successfully represents the radical transition of grassroots society from passive recipients of violence to active counter-attackers; proving that the effectiveness of state terror automatically blunts and recoils to destroy the rulers' own psychological stability once the public possesses the cultural courage to invert the logic of intimidation.

Keywords: Literary Appreciation; Poetry of Resistance; Semiotics; Transformation of Symbols.

INTRODUCTION

Background of the problem

Literature never emerges from a sterile vacuum. As one of humanity's oldest cultural products, literature is, in essence, both a reflection and a refraction of society that captures the upheavals, inequalities, and contradictions within it. Language, at its core, is a symbol or sign that requires a shared conceptual understanding to avoid misunderstandings (Yusuf & Farhan, 2022). Through the medium of language, literature acts as an aesthetic mirror that records how a civilization operates, including how power relations between the rulers and the ruled are established. When social reality is tainted by injustice, literature

often shifts its function from merely a means of entertainment to a watchtower that directs its critical gaze straight into the heart of power.

In a repressive sociopolitical landscape, maintaining power often comes at a high cost. To minimize the costs of physical conflict which could draw international attention or trigger more massive mass resistance rulers or powerful actors tend to resort to tactics of symbolic violence. The phenomenon of political and social intimidation in public spaces often manifests in the form of sending horrific and repulsive symbols of terror such as severed pig heads or rat carcasses to the homes of critical groups. From a semiotic perspective, these actions are not merely acts of mischief but rather a structured operationalization of terror. Pig heads and rat carcasses are sent as markers carrying an implicit message: "You are not safe, you are unclean, and we can destroy you at any time." These symbols of physical violence, transformed into inanimate objects, are deliberately designed to psychologically paralyze the victims, silence critical thinking through the trauma of fear, and force the people into silent submission. An era marked by high levels of social inequality has driven Indonesian musicians to use song lyrics as a means of expressing their feelings and criticism of social realities, just as Indonesian poets and writers often use their works as symbols of resistance against threatening powers.

However, amid this siege of symbolic repression, the poem "Kepala Babi" emerges as a radical yet refreshing anomaly within the tradition of resistance literature. This poem breaks the chain of fear that has been so carefully cultivated by those in power. Through straightforward and often confrontational lines, the collective subject in the poem reveals a peculiar psychological stance: they feel no fear whatsoever, show no sign of cowering, and do not cast themselves as pitiful victims.

On the contrary, the text of this poem represents a brilliant act of resistance through the power of words. When formal channels of communication are blocked and physical repression looms, language is adopted by the people as both a last line of defense and a tactical weapon. This poem demonstrates that words possess a form of cultural alchemy; they have the ability to reduce, destroy, and subvert the meaning of the instruments of terror deployed by the authorities, transforming them into a satirical and offensive energy of resistance. It is this phenomenon of the reversal of power that demands an in-depth literary appreciation study, in order to unravel how a poetic text is capable of transforming an object of intimidation into an instrument of subversion that delegitimizes the authority of the ruler.

Statement of the problem

Based on the outline of the background of the issue presented earlier, the main focus of this study rests on a textual and contextual analysis of symbolic resistance in literary works. To examine how a poem can subvert the logic of terror into an instrument of subversion, a reading is required that goes beyond the text's visual surface to explore its deeper meaning.

Theoretically, the power of a counter-discourse in modern poetry can function optimally only when there is complete harmony between the aesthetic form presented by the poet and the ideological content the poet seeks to convey.

Furthermore, this study must also unravel the semiotic process by which a sign with oppressive connotations is deconstructed into a counter-threat to those in power.

Therefore, in order to provide a sharp, systematic, and focused analytical framework, the research question for this study is formulated as follows:

- How do the physical and inner structures interact and integrate to form the unity of the poem “Kepala Babi” as a text of resistance literature?

Scope of Analysis: This section will examine how visible elements such as the choice of vulgar vocabulary, the use of satirical figures of speech, gustatory imagery, and bold typography (physical structure) interconnect and reinforce the implied meanings such as the theme of subversion, a defiant tone, and a message of resistance to intimidation (internal structure) to form a cohesive aesthetic whole.

- How are the mechanisms of deconstruction and transformation of symbols of violence (“pig’s head” and “rat carcass”) operated and represented in the poem?

Analysis Focus: This point will unpack the process of meaning transmutation from a cultural semiotics perspective; it will analyze how material objects—sent as instruments of psychological terror by those in power—are successfully reclaimed, processed, and recoded by the collective subject “We” into a force of counter-aggression that, in turn, threatens the psychological stability of the rulers.

Research objectives

The objectives of this study are formulated as concrete steps to address all the issues identified in the research question. Through a comprehensive literary-critical approach, this study aims not only to provide a superficial reading but also to uncover the ideological and semiotic dimensions hidden within the text.

Specifically, the direction and goals to be achieved through this study are as follows:

1. To describe, analyze, and map the interrelationships between the physical and inner structures that constitute the wholeness of the poem “Kepala Babi.”

Research Objective: This study aims to examine in detail how visual and auditory aesthetic elements (such as diction, satirical style, gustatory imagery, and typography) function as mechanical anchors that convey the poem’s inner essence (themes of subversion, a defiant tone, and a message of resilience). Through this analysis, it will be demonstrated how these two structures integrate organically to form a cohesive text of resistance.

2. To unpack, analyze, and explain the semiotic mechanisms through which the poem subverts the symbolic meaning of terror into a subversive instrument of resistance.

Research Objectives: This study aims to dissect the process of meaning transmutation (re-coding) of the material objects of violence,

namely the “pig’s head” and “rat carcass.” The analysis focuses on how the text reclaims the function of these objects of terror through culinary metaphors (“spicy resistance”) and metaphysical psychological warfare (“conjured into a curse”), thereby turning the ruling class’s instruments of intimidation into weapons of counter-aggression that shatter the tyrant’s psychological safe space.

Theoretical foundation

The theory of poetic structuralism

Literary works are created by authors to be enjoyed and appreciated (Fransori, 2017). The structuralist approach views literary works particularly poetry as a totality constructed from elements that are interrelated and inseparable from one another. According to the theory of poetic structuralism developed by I.A. Richards and later widely adapted in the context of Indonesian literature by Herman J. Waluyo (2005), poetry is essentially a structure consisting of two main layers: the physical structure (method) and the inner structure (meaning). These two layers work together simultaneously to produce a unified whole of meaning.

The physical structure is the visible, material aesthetic element of poetry that can be directly observed through the text. This layer acts as a mechanical medium that constructs the body of the poem. The physical structure encompasses several crucial components, including:

- Diction: The poet’s careful selection of words to evoke a specific aesthetic effect and convey a particular nuance of meaning.
- Imagery: A arrangement of words that stimulates the reader’s senses (sight, hearing, taste, touch) so that they seem to experience what is being described.
- Figures of Speech: The use of figurative language to emphasize, enliven poetic effects, and amplify the text’s impact.
- Typography: The visual presentation of a poem, including line breaks, stanzas, and the absence of punctuation, which helps determine the poem’s rhythm and how it is read.

On the other hand, the inner structure is the implicit essence or soul of a poem that lies behind its physical form. This layer encompasses the theme (the central idea or underlying sense of the poem), mood and tone (the poet’s attitude toward the subject or the reader), and the message (the moral lesson or intention the poet wishes to convey).

From a structuralist perspective, the physical structure and the inner structure should not be understood as two separate entities. The physical structure serves as a means of expression, while the inner structure is the content being expressed. High-quality resistance poetry can only be created if its physical structure (such as sharp and harsh word choices) is able to organically serve and bring to life its inner structure (themes of subversion and a defiant tone).

The Theory of Semiotics and Symbolic Transformation

Semiotics is the study of signs, how signs function, and how they produce meaning within a culture. According to the ideas of leading figures in semiotics such as Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes, a sign never stands alone; it is shaped by the relationship between the signifier (the physical or material form of the sign) and the signified (the mental concept or meaning contained within it).

A fundamental principle of cultural semiotics states that the meaning of a sign or symbol is not static, absolute, or eternal. The meaning of a sign is arbitrary and heavily influenced by space, time, and the surrounding constellation of power relations. Because meaning is socially constructed, it is always open to negotiation, deconstruction, and transformation.

This is where the concept of symbolic transformation plays a crucial role in resistance literature. When a symbol of violence is deliberately produced by those in power with specific cultural codes for example, the sending of a “pig’s head” or “rat carcass,” which are conventionally signified as “insults, filth, threats, and terror” that symbol is actually demanding psychological compliance from the recipient. The perpetrators of terror assume that the code of meaning they have imbued into these objects is definitive and will instill fear.

However, the theory of subversive semiotics demonstrates that the recipient of the sign possesses full agency to break the chain of this hegemonic meaning. Through a process of deconstruction, the recipient engages in counter-interpretation and re-coding. The material object of violence is decontextualized (stripped of its original function as a tool of terror) and then imbued with a new meaning that is entirely opposite. Symbols originally designed to psychologically paralyze victims are, in the hands of the sign recipient, infused with new value and transmuted into offensive energy of resistance. Poetry becomes a space of semiotic alchemy where terror is repurposed as a cultural weapon to dismantle the authority of the ruler.

METHOD

Research approach and methods

This study employs a qualitative approach using descriptive methods. The qualitative approach was chosen because the primary focus of this study is to understand, interpret, and uncover the deeper meanings contained within literary texts, rather than dealing with statistical data or numbers. In line with the interpretive nature of literary research, this approach allows the researcher to look beyond the surface of the text to capture the sociopolitical and psychological phenomena represented by the poet through the lines of his poetry.

Meanwhile, the descriptive method is used to present findings systematically, factually, and accurately regarding the physical structure, inner structure, and the process of symbolic transformation of violence occurring in the poem.

To dissect textual data in a targeted manner, this study employs content analysis. In the field of literary criticism, content analysis serves as a systematic

tool for identifying the specific characteristics of a text. This method does not merely count the frequency of word occurrences but focuses on analyzing the latent content (hidden meanings) behind the poet's language choices.

Through content analysis, researchers can:

1. Break down the components that make up a poem (diction, imagery, figures of speech, theme, tone, and message).
2. Connect the text to a broader social context, namely the phenomena of state repression and grassroots resistance.

Data sources and research data

In qualitative literary research, a clear distinction between data sources and research data is crucial for maintaining the validity of the study.

- **Data Sources:** The primary data source in this study is a contemporary/anonymous poem titled "Kepala Babi." This poem is taken in its entirety as a single written document that serves as the material object of the study.
- **Research Data:** The data in this study consists of linguistic units found within the poem "Kepala Babi." This data consists of words, phrases, clauses, sentences, lines, and stanzas that contain indications and representations of the variables under study.

Specifically, the research data is divided into three categories:

1. Data representing the physical structure of the poem (e.g., the use of the vulgar phrase "mulas mencret-mencret" as a form of satirical figurative language).
2. Data representing the poem's inner structure (e.g., the defiant tone in the phrase "rica pedas perlawanan").
3. Data representing the transformation of symbols of violence (the process of transmutation from objects of terror "pig's head" and "rat carcass into instruments of counter-aggression).

Data collection and analysis techniques

To ensure the completeness of this methodology chapter, data collection was conducted using the read-and-record technique. The researcher performed repeated, critical, and in-depth readings (close reading) of the poetic texts. Subsequently, the data was recorded and categorized (coded) into a corpus table based on the research questions.

The data analysis technique used follows an interactive model, which comprises three main stages:

1. **Data Reduction:** Selecting, focusing on, and simplifying textual data from the poems that are truly relevant to the structure of the poems and the transformation of symbols.
2. **Data Presentation:** Presenting the categorized data in a descriptive-analytical narrative in Chapter IV, supported by structuralist and semiotic analytical frameworks.

3. Conclusion Drawing: Formulating the essence of the text analysis results to validly answer the research questions, which is then presented in Chapter V.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the physical structure of the poem “Kepala Babi”

The physical structure of a poem is a formal linguistic domain that poets use as a medium to embody their subversive ideas. In the poem “Kepala Babi,” all physical elements are not designed to conform to conventional aesthetic norms that prioritize melodious beauty, but rather are arranged as instruments of provocation and confrontation.

Macabre and vulgar diction and vocabulary

The word choice (diction) in this poem is dominated by vocabulary with dirty, gruesome, and taboo connotations (macabre-vulgar). The poet consciously exploits words such as “pig’s head,” “rat carcass,” “diarrhea,” and “black magic.” In the tradition of bourgeois literature or academic lyric poetry, such diction is often avoided because it is considered to undermine aesthetic value. However, in the context of grassroots resistance literature, the use of this vulgar diction serves a crucial political function.

This crude and vulgar vocabulary is deliberately employed as a form of linguistic rebellion to shatter the ruling class’s false politeness. The authorities often use euphemistic, polished, and bureaucratic language to mask their oppressive policies or corrupt actions. By throwing out raw and repulsive terms like “rat carcass” and “diarrhea,” this poem instantly tears away the elite’s mask of politeness. This diction emphasizes that the conflict between the people and the ruling class is a real, brutal, and uncompromising clash—one that requires no sugarcoating.

Culinary and mystical imagery

The poem “Pig’s Head” builds its shock value by stimulating the reader’s senses through two contrasting types of imagery: gustatory imagery (the sense of taste), which is physical and culinary in nature, and visual-affective imagery, which is metaphysical and mystical.

- *Gustatory Imagery (Taste): Presented powerfully through the phrases “prepare and serve” and “spicy rica of resistance.” The poet does not merely instruct the reader to observe an object of violence but invites the reader into the kitchen of subversion. Readers are invited to imagine the cooking process, feel the heat of the spices, and taste the aggressive “spiciness.” Spicy cuisine (rica-rica) is transformed into a metaphor for anger that burns the tongue, creating the impression that resistance is something actively processed, consumed, and enjoyed by the people.*
- *Visual-Affective (Mystical) Imagery: This appears in the second stanza through the phrase “haunting your nights.” This imagery evokes a visual perception of darkness and triggers a suffocating sense of anxiety. In contrast to the tangible, fiery culinary imagery in the first stanza, this mystical imagery operates coolly in the inner realm, illustrating how the*

material intimidation of the rulers is projected back as invisible psychological terror.

Figurative language (figures of speech)

The rhetorical dynamics of this poem are driven by satirical figures of speech and high-level sarcasm intertwined with hyperbole. This stylistic device is fully embodied in the phrase:

“...which will give you / diarrhea / for the duration of your term”

This phrase is a profane taunt that radically demeans the dignity of an office that has long been glorified by those in power. “Term of office” is a symbol of sacred formal legitimacy, replete with ceremonial grandeur, luxurious amenities, and political honor. However, through this satirical-hyperbolic style, that sociopolitical grandeur is extremely degraded into nothing more than humiliating and trivial biological suffering—namely, a digestive ailment (stomach cramps and diarrhea). This stylistic device serves to desacralize power; it lays bare the fact that behind the haughty cloak of his authority, the tyrant is merely a fragile, mortal being who can be made to suffer biologically by the words of resistance.

Typography and the rhythm of resistance

Visually (typographically), this poem is constructed with a very straightforward structure, built from short, lean lines. It rejects complex visual ornamentation and dispenses with formal punctuation (such as commas or periods) as well as strict capitalization.

This minimalist and hurried typographic design reflects the tactical, efficient, decisive, and no-nonsense character of grassroots resistance. The short lines force the reader to recite the poem at a rapid pace, creating a rhythmic beat reminiscent of a political pamphlet’s declaration or the assertiveness of a chanted mantra. The absence of a conventional end-rhyme structure (such as a-b-a-b) is replaced by internal rhyme based on assonance and hard consonant alliteration, affirming that the aesthetic of this poetry is one of confrontation that refuses to submit to the harmonized standards of the ruling class.

Analysis of the inner structure of the poem “Kepala Babi”

Theme: subversion of power and radical resistance

The main idea or central theme underlying the poem “Kepala Babi” is the death of fear and the radical subversion of power. This poem does not address themes of communal suffering, resignation to fate, or the lamentations of marginalized groups—themes commonly found in melancholic works of social criticism. The primary focus of this poem’s theme is the loss of the ruling class’s ability to instill fear through its instruments of terror in the face of the oppressed who refuse to be intimidated.

Through this theme of subversion, the poem reveals a crucial psychological turning point. When tyrants deploy symbols of violence, they expect obedience born of fear. However, the poem’s theme asserts the opposite: an absolute refusal to accept victimhood. The people (the “We” in the poem) are portrayed

as a resilient entity that has successfully overcome the psychological trauma of political intimidation and, in fact, reclaimed their agency as counter-attackers.

Tone and mood: fierce, defiant, and cold

The poet's attitude toward the subject (the ruler) is reflected in a tone that is fierce, defiant, and cold. This poem vehemently rejects a tone of lamentation, pleading for justice, or resigned weeping. The poet does not portray the people as a weak group begging for mercy at the feet of those in power.

On the contrary, the tone articulated is a confident voice cloaked in a cynical smile. The phrase "we process and serve" is uttered not with uncontrolled, aimless emotion, but with an intimidating calm. There is an aura of inner superiority displayed by the people toward the rulers; they look down on this package of terror. The atmosphere that builds up is one of suffocating tension for the rulers. The authorities, who initially acted as psychological hunters, are now demoted to the role of the threatened party, haunted by inner paranoia.

Message

The message or moral lesson the poet seeks to convey through this poem boils down to a single thesis: the effectiveness of an instrument of political terror depends entirely on the psychological response of its victims. No matter how strong the ruling class's hegemonic structure may be, it will collapse if its main foundation the people's fear is successfully shattered.

The poet conveys the message that psychological terror such as the delivery of corpses or other symbolic threats will automatically become ineffective and blunt if the grassroots community possesses two key assets: the courage to act and cultural intelligence. Courage serves to break the chain of trauma, while cultural intelligence is used to turn the logic of terror into a weapon of liberation. Through this poem, readers are made aware that the best weapon against arrogant tyranny is not bullets, but the people's ability to laugh at that terror and reframe it as a curse upon the ruler.

Discussion: the transformation of symbols of violence

This section provides an in-depth analysis of the dialectics of resistance present in the text through the lens of subversive semiotics. The primary focus of the analysis is on how the collective subject "We" (the people) re-codes the material of terror produced by the rulers, breaks the chain of conventional oppressive meanings, and transmutes it into counter-aggression.

Deconstructing the "Pig's Head" into "Spicy Rica of Resistance"

In the first stanza, the poem opens with a sharply symbolic confrontation:

"You send a pig's head / we prepare and serve it / as spicy rica of resistance"

Culturally and anthropologically, the sending of a "pig's head" by the enemy carries a highly concentrated code of terror. This object is a symbol of the ultimate humiliation, a marker of impurity, and a mafioso-style message of intimidation aimed at breaking the recipient's spirit. The sender's (the ruler's)

underlying assumption is that the object will elicit a response of panic, disgust, or trauma that will paralyze the people's critical resistance.

However, the text carries out a radical deconstruction by reversing the logic of "cleansing." Instead of being discarded, shunned with horror, or reported with the resignation of a victim, the object of terror is actually met with active domestic actions: "we prepare and serve it." The act of processing a pig's head into a meal (spicy rica) symbolizes the extraordinary ability of grassroots communities to neutralize the poison of intimidation.

The people refuse to be objects of consumption by the rulers' terror. Instead, they act as subjects who consume the negative energy of the enemy. Feelings of disgust and fear are absorbed, digested, and transformed within the "cultural kitchen" into fuel for resistance that burns back at the sender. The "spicy rica" metaphor depicts a hot and sharp collective anger, which is then regurgitated back at the rulers in the form of a biological punishment a constant, humiliating heartburn throughout their term in office. Through this material transmutation, the poem affirms that every act of intimidation sent by tyranny will only enrich the forms and creativity of the people's resistance.

The metaphor of the "Rat Carcass" Becoming "Teluh" (Psychological Aggression)

The mechanism of symbolic transformation continues in the second stanza with a darker escalation, shifting from the physical-material realm to the metaphysical-psychological realm:

"You send a rat carcass / we brew it into a curse / that haunts your nights"

"Rat carcass" represents biological decay, pests, disease, and material degradation. When the rulers throw rat carcasses into the people's living spaces, this act symbolizes an attempt to defile, degrade their dignity, and spread tangible anxiety in broad daylight.

The people's act of subversion in this stanza is to shift the battlefield. That rotten material carcass is not cleansed through fear, but rather adopted and "transformed into a curse" (santet/black magic). The transformation from a (physical) carcass into a (metaphysical) curse marks the beginning of an asymmetrical psychological war (psy-war). The rulers may well have a monopoly on actual violence; they possess the apparatus, weapons, formal laws, and physical power to oppress the people in the public sphere. However, the people retaliate with the only weapon that cannot be countered by concrete fortresses or military escorts: psychological paranoia and guilt.

In this poem, the curse serves as a projection of the shadows of the rulers' political sins, festering within their own consciousness. By asserting that this curse will "haunt your nights," the text ingeniously shatters the tyrant's most private space. The night and the bedroom are symbols of protection and tranquility places where people shed their social masks. However, through this symbolic transformation, the rulers' luxurious bedrooms are no longer safe. When night falls and the lights are turned off, the grandeur of their positions crumbles, replaced by a latent fear of the people's retribution, which haunts them in the form of constant inner anxiety.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the analysis and discussion presented in the previous chapter, this study of the poem “Kepala Babi” from the perspectives of literary appreciation and the transformation of symbols of violence yields the following important conclusions:

Aesthetic and Ideological Integrity: The poem “Kepala Babi” is a highly cohesive work of resistance literature, supported by an absolute organic harmony between its physical and inner structures. The poem’s physical structure characterized by the use of vulgar-macabre diction (pig’s head, rat carcass, diarrhea, black magic), a sharp satirical-sarcastic style, gustatory-mystical imagery, and the typography of short, forceful lines does not exist merely as an aesthetic ornament. These formal elements act as effective mechanical tools to bring the poem’s inner structure to life namely, the theme of subverting power, a cynical and defiant tone, and a message about the resilience of grassroots communities. These two structures mutually reinforce and interlock to create a dense, straightforward, and confrontational effect of resistance.

Representation of Symbolic Transformation: This poem brilliantly represents the phenomenon of the transformation of symbols of violence from the perspective of subversive semiotics. The text documents a psychological turning point among grassroots communities: a radical shift from a passive stance of accepting violence to that of active subjects who strike back through aesthetic-satirical means. Material objects originally produced by the rulers as instruments of political terror and psychological intimidation namely, “pig heads” and “rat carcasses” are successfully deconstructed, reclaimed, and re-coded by the collective subject “We.” The physical terror of the rulers was neutralized by the people, transmuted into a new form of aggressive energy (in the form of culinary subversion and mystical paranoia) that in turn invaded the private sphere and undermined the tyrant’s inner stability throughout his term in office.

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